

VZCZCXRO1912

OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH

DE RUEHKL #0980/01 3432341

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

O 092341Z DEC 09

FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3559

INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 000980

SIPDIS

NSC FOR WALTON AND BADER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/09/2019

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KTIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE FOR GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES

VERVEER'S DECEMBER 3-4 VISIT TO MALAYSIA

Classified By: POLCOUNS Brian McFeeters for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Verveer met with a wide range of public and private sector representatives during a December 3-4 visit to Kuala Lumpur. Accompanied by Ambassador Keith, Special Advisor Wenchi Yu, and Embassy officers, Ambassador Verveer discussed Malaysia's efforts to promote gender equality and combat trafficking-in-persons with Minister of Women's Affairs Shahrizat and Deputy Foreign Minister Kohilan Pillay. Ambassador Verveer and Minister Shahrizat discussed increasing "women's dialogue" as part of U.S.-Malaysian bilateral dialogue. In reply to Shahrizat's argument that Malaysia did not belong on Tier 3 of the USG's 2009 Trafficking in Persons report, Ambassadors Verveer and Keith explained that the GOM needed to take additional steps to combat trafficking for sexual exploitation, of vulnerable refugees, and in the labor sector. Shahrizat also asked for USG help with a notional idea for a "First Ladies" summit contemplated for 2010. Deputy FM Pillay told Verveer that Prime Minister Najib Razak placed great importance on gender equality in Malaysia. Verveer also met Sisters in Islam, a Malaysian NGO espousing equality for Muslim women under syariah law to hear concerns about recent police interest in the NGO's espousal of a progressive perspective on the Kartika case. Septel reports Ambassador Verveer's meetings with NGOs and women in the private sector. End Summary.

MEETING WITH THE WOMEN'S MINISTER

¶12. (C) A December 4 meeting between Ambassador Verveer and Minister for Women, Family, and Community Development Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil covered Trafficking in Persons (TIP), increased networking opportunities for women between the United States and Malaysia, and Malaysia's notional desire to host a "First Ladies" Summit in 2010. Ambassador Verveer praised Malaysia for having passed a law against domestic violence in 1994, before many other countries. Shahrizat expressed her disappointment about and disagreement with Malaysia's placement on Tier 3 in the 2009 TIP Report released in June, calling it the result of insufficient engagement between our governments. She said she was committed to working with the United States to get Malaysia to Tier 2 and ultimately Tier 1. Ambassador Verveer explained her long involvement in anti-TIP efforts, the difficulties of addressing the TIP problem, and all governments' obligation to prosecute traffickers as well as to provide shelters and protect migrants and refugees. Ambassador Keith emphasized the need to act quickly to register progress across three key areas: sexual exploitation, vulnerable refugees, and labor trafficking. He reminded Shahrizat the 2010 TIP Report would already be in preparation by March of 2010.

¶13. (C) Shahrizat explained that Malaysia was deliberating over how to host a "First Ladies" Summit in 2010 and

requested assistance in persuading FLOTUS to attend. Ambassador Verveer said that she would be delighted to deliver that news to the First Lady's office, but suggested that the GOM needed to think through how such a concept could be fleshed out in a way to create new value added with regard to objectives and participation. She added that the idea might offer an opportunity for Malaysia to demonstrate leadership, perhaps among ASEAN countries, on a critical issue such as TIP or women's empowerment. Both parties agreed to remain in touch as the Malaysian side refined its thinking.

¶4. (C) Shahrizat also requested improved exchange programs between the United States and Malaysia for women in politics and government. She said that increased networking would educate Americans about Malaysia and "dispel myths."

Ambassador Verveer, recalling that women's issues had been added to our strategic dialogue with India, noted the ongoing strategic dialogue between our countries (between A/S Campbell and MFA SecGen Rastam) could be a good vehicle for women's empowerment issues. Another proven network in other settings has been the exchange of visits by women parliamentarians.

¶5. (C) After the meeting, Ambassador Verveer and Ambassador Keith expressed to Shahrizat their concern that GOM police officials were investigating the women's rights NGO Sisters in Islam (SIS) for its comments regarding the Kartika caning case (see paras 8-9). Ambassador Verveer told Shahrizat that SIS is an internationally respected NGO of progressive Muslim women and that Shahrizat, as the Women's Minister, "must get involved and stop this." Shahrizat said that she has known

KUALA LUMP 00000980 002 OF 003

SIS for a long time and that she was very upset that the religious "bigots" were pushing to have Kartika caned. She was indignant over the hypocrisy of the relevant royal family in Pahang, who were themselves heavy drinkers. She explained that even PM Najib had to exercise caution with conservative Muslims who had spoken out on this issue. She recalled she had complained directly to the Sultan of Pahang and was well aware of the negative image*a false image, she affirmed*that the Kartika case presented to the world.

Ambassador Keith assured Shahrizat that he had raised the Kartika case with the PM's office, and he would be doing so repeatedly until it was resolved; it was evident that the PM's advisors were aware of the black eye the case was giving Malaysia, but it had not yet been resolved. Both Ambassadors urged Shahrizat to engage with the PM to ensure the SIS were not harassed further. Ambassador Verveer emphasized the success SIS had achieved in presenting to the world a progressive face for Islam in Malaysia; that was at risk, she underlined.

Ambassador Verveer Meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Pillay

¶6. (C) In a December 3 courtesy call at the Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Verveer told Deputy Foreign Minister Kohilan Pillay that Malaysia served as a model for the world on how a predominantly Muslim society could successfully integrate women into both the public and private spheres. Malaysia was uniquely situated to serve as a bridge between the East and West and between Muslim and non-Muslim countries. As Malaysia was demonstrating, gender equality was a prerequisite for prosperity -- societies that made use of the talent of their women were the societies most likely to succeed. This entailed not only ensuring legal equality for women but also offering them opportunities in such areas as trade and business, especially small business. Equality also meant protecting women from exploitation; Malaysia was moving forward in this area, taking a serious stand against trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. Ambassador Keith added that trafficking in all its forms, including for labor, was tied to organized crime and a society that did not deal with the trafficking problem would suffer in other areas, such as narcotics addiction and disease.

¶7. (C) Deputy Minister Pillay agreed with Ambassador Verveer's assessment that Malaysia was doing much to promote women, noting for example that in Malaysian universities approximately 70 percent of students were females. PM Najib had said publicly he wanted 30 percent of policymakers in the administration to be women, and his government was working to achieve this goal. Moreover, the PM's Office had set aside a special fund of 111 million Ringgit (about \$34 million) to promote women's involvement in business. Pillay praised U.S. efforts, especially those of the Obama administration, to advocate for women, noting that his government was also committed to the task of helping women. In addition to its internal efforts, the Najib administration used fora such as ASEAN's Commission on Women and Children to advocate on behalf of women -- promoting their participation in society was an effort that required the participation of all countries.

MEETING WITH NGO SISTERS IN ISLAM

¶8. (C) As noted above, two representatives of Sisters In Islam (SIS) met privately and confidentially with Ambassador Verveer and Ambassador Keith at the Ambassador,s residence on December 3. Former Executive Director of the NGO Zainah Anwar said she wanted Ambassador Verveer to understand that conservative Islamic elements in Malaysia had become stronger under Prime Minister Najib, who she said has neither strong Islamic credentials nor a strong personal commitment to Islam. She said conservatives were pushing for a less-tolerant, Islamic-law-based Malaysia that, among other problems, would be detrimental for women. Members of the political establishment privately opposed these developments but lacked the courage or political will to oppose them publicly.

¶9. (SBU) Zainah said that her organization, which had been speaking out on pluralist interpretations of Islam and women,s issues for 30 years, was apprehensive now because it had recently become the police had initiated an investigation of SIS based on 50 complaints lodged by conservative Islamic clerics and NGOs. Police had recently visited the Sisters In Islam offices on the basis of a complaint) very serious under Malaysian law) that the organization had insulted the King of Malaysia with its comments about Islam. Current Executive Director of Sisters in Islam Hamidah Marican said

KUALA LUMP 00000980 003 OF 003

that harassment of the NGO had increased markedly after she and others spoke out against the pending caning sentence of a Muslim woman, Kartika. Ambassador Verveer praised the group,s courage in speaking forthrightly about the rights of women under Islam, adding that it might be helpful to have representatives of Sisters In Islam come to Washington. Ambassador Keith added that he wanted to stay in touch with the group as key Embassy contacts, and wanted to be kept abreast of the police investigation. (Note: in a subsequent conversation with Ambassador Keith, former Bar Council head*and last year,s Woman of Courage award winner from Asia*Ambeega Sreenivasan, who is acting as SIS counsel, Ambeega suggested that the authorities were prompted to act by conservatives, criticism of SIS, but it was out of wariness of conservative influence that they acted, not a desire to muzzle SIS. The situation bore watching, of course, and Ambeega would continue to stay in close touch, but it was possible that there would be no further harassment of SIS so long as there were no new pressures from conservatives. End Note.)

¶10. (U) Ambassador Verveer cleared this message.
KEITH